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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING CLASS. CAPTION)

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS IZ
SUBJECT: AL-SADR REINS IN JAM: PR RUSE OR STRATEGIC MOVE?

REF: BAGHDAD 2906 (CRISIS IN KARBALA)

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S/NF) Summary: Moqtada al-Sadr's much publicized August 29 statement calling for his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) to suspend operations for six months and ordering its restructure was well-received by Prime Minister al-Maliki and welcomed by a leader of a main target of recent JAM violence, the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council (ISCI) and its Badr militia. The order may have been a public relations gambit to rehabilitate al-Sadr's public image among Shi'a in the wake of audacious JAM violence at Karbala's sacred Shi'a shrines during an important religious festival. Alternatively, the order may represent a strategic move by al-Sadr and his top commanders to impose their authority upon a large, loosely-organized, and heavily-armed rabble over which they currently exercise only varying levels of operational control. In this scenario, the order may have been suggested or forced upon al-Sadr by his Iranian hosts as a goodwill gesture to ISCI/Badr, the Shi'a community, and possibly even the USG. While it is too early to assess the degree of JAM adherence to al-Sadr's order, preliminary intelligence reports about the order's underlying insincerity provide little basis for optimism. End Summary.

A Hit With the Political Class

¶12. (C) Al-Sadr's call was generally welcomed by Iraq's political class. Prime Minister al-Maliki told General Petraeus and DCM August 30 that he was convinced of al-Sadr's sincerity in issuing the statement, and predicted JAM would be changed from within. Al-Maliki said that during his recent visit to Tehran, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told him Iran now recognized the "danger" created by its support of JAM. He assured Maliki that Iran would curb its support of al-Sadr's militia. Even Hadi al-Amri, head of the Council of Representatives Badr bloc (Badr offices were the targets of fierce JAM attacks over the past two days) characterized al-Sadr's order as a positive development, but added that he would reserve final judgment until he sees how the order is implemented. Al-Amri told us with a trace of envy that no other Iraqi group can recruit personnel or disseminate information as quickly as JAM. To illustrate the point, he told us that armed JAM assaults over the past few days on 12 offices belonging to Badr/ISCI began in various places throughout Iraq almost immediately after JAM members

spread a false rumor that an armed Badr guard had sparked the recent Karbala violence by killing a JAM member. An ISCI source told us that JAM attacks on his organization had largely ended with the exception of an August 31 kidnapping of 12-15 Badr members by JAM fighters in Sadr City. The governor of Najaf told PRT leader that the JAM ceasefire was a meaningful development that was being observed in his area, and that he and the Karbala Governor had played a role in al-Sadr's decision. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has remained silent on the Karbala mayhem, though his Karbala representative condemned the violence and called for a GOI investigation into the matter.

But How Will It Play In the Hovels of Sadr City?

¶3. (S/NF) Al-Sadr's call for a ceasefire may have been nothing more than a somewhat impulsive attempt at PR damage control after August 27-29 violence in Karbala (reftel) created a public perception that JAM fighters had befooled one of Shi'a Islam's most sacred sites with violence, ruined an important Shi'a pilgrimage, and spilled the blood of fellow Shi'a Muslims, some of them innocent worshippers who were caught in the crossfire. If that is the case, the ceasefire order may soon be abandoned as abruptly as it was issued: Badr's Hadi al-Amri pointed out that al-Sadr issued a similar statement in the past that prohibited JAM attacks on Iraqi Security Forces, an order that was honored only in the breach and quickly forgotten. Al-Sadr may be trying to pose as a reasonable leader who cannot be held responsible for the conduct of rogue fighters who operate "outside" the JAM framework, while leaving JAM's loose operational command/control chain and violent actions unchanged. The plausibility of this latter scenario is buttressed by reporting in other channels which suggests that JAM fighters have been instructed, presumably by someone other than al-Sadr, to continue fighting without using the name of al-Sadr or senior JAM commanders, and that JAM "Special Groups" will likely increase attacks against Badr, Coalition Forces, and Iraqi Security Forces in the coming days.

¶4. (C) On the other hand, we should not yet rule out that Al-Sadr's order might be a strategic move to impose his movement's leadership upon a large, decentralized and heavily-armed network of franchise-like cells, some acting like criminal gangs with others acting as militia units, over which he and his top lieutenants now have only limited operational control. The Prime Minister for one appears to hold this view. In addition, the order may have been suggested or even forced upon al-Sadr by his current hosts in Iran as a gesture of goodwill to ISCI/Badr and the larger Shi'a community, and possibly even to the USG. An al-Sadr spokesman clarified that the order would include a prohibition on attacks against Coalition Forces, which could be viewed as an opening response by Iranian leaders - delivered through al-Sadr - to our demand that Iran cease malign actions in Iraq, and an effort on Iran's part to keep Iraq's Shi'a-on-Shi'a violence at a manageable (from Tehran's perspective) level. The order might also be seen as a tacit admission by al-Sadr that JAM is feeling the pain of Coalition strikes. In any event, unless the degree of al-Sadr's operational control over JAM and JAM's overall cohesiveness is much higher than it is widely rumored to be, Al-Sadr risks a major blow to his prestige with the six-month suspension order as he may not be able to bring all JAM elements under his sway.

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